Montgomery APC Prepares the Faith Community
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As local public health agencies plan and prepare for emergency events it becomes even more critical to build community partnerships to assist with outreach efforts to at-risk populations. Faith communities have played a major role in responding to emergency events. During Katrina faith communities stepped forward and provided shelter, food, clothing, and other essential services to those who were displaced by the hurricane. Faith Community Nurses (FCNs), formerly known as parish nurses, are known and trusted individuals who work to promote health initiatives within their faith communities. The faith community is defined as a church, congregation, parish, synagogue, temple or mosque.

Over the past year, Montgomery County's Advanced Practice Center for Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (Montgomery APC) has worked to develop a collaborative partnership with the FCNs in the county. In the spring of 2005, Montgomery APC organized an ad hoc Faith Community Nursing Group to extend public health's outreach and educational activities on pre-event emergency planning and preparedness to faith communities, focusing on persons with special needs. Montgomery APC brought together key regional faith community nursing networks as well as a county school of nursing to be included in the Faith Community Nursing Group. In April and May, 2005 the Montgomery APC conducted three focus groups with the county faith community nursing networks to learn the level of public health emergency preparedness in their faith communities. The summary report of the focus groups is accessible on Montgomery APC's website at: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/apc.

One of the outcomes from the focus groups was the planning of a conference on public health emergency preparedness for practicing faith community nurses. The conference, "Strengthening the Strengtheners: An Emergency Preparedness Conference for Faith Community Nurses/Health Ministries," was held on March 3, 2006.   There were more than 50 participants. Presentation topics included:

- Empowerment
- Faith Community Nurses (FCNs) Outreach to the Isolated Elderly
- Preparing for and Responding to Public Health Emergency Events for FCNs
- Avian Influenza and Pandemic Influenza
- Interactive activity using a pandemic influenza scenario

Montgomery APC, in collaboration with the Faith Community Nursing Group, developed a *Toolkit for Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response for Congregations*.   Each participant at the conference received the "Toolkit" which included a "Congregational Needs Assessment" and other national, regional, and local resources. The "Toolkit" is also available on Montgomery APC's website.

The interactive pandemic influenza conference activity helped FCNs to identify specific strategies to assist special needs populations within their faith communities prepare for a public health emergency. Some of the emergency preparedness ideas generated included:

- Development of emergency preparedness kits;
- Creation of systems to identify the isolated elderly and other persons with special needs;
- Distribution of educational materials at health fairs; and
- Development of articles for weekly faith community bulletins.

FCNs, who attended the conference, were given the opportunity to write a brief proposal regarding an emergency preparedness activity to implement in their congregation. Approved proposals received a small stipend to implement the proposed activity. A follow-up report on the outcome(s) of each proposed project will be submitted in June 2006 and shared with all conference attendees.

The partnership between the Montgomery APC and the faith community will continue to grow. The emergency preparedness conference served as a stepping stone for future collaborative projects to better prepare Montgomery County residents for an emergency event. For more information about this collaboration please contact Patricia O'Hare at Patricia.Ohare@montgomerycountymd.gov.